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ABSTRACT

This booklet examines what Orientation and Mobility (O&M) is and how it can influence the independence of a child with visual impairment or blindness. The booklet is divided into four sections--Reaching, Crawling, Walking, and Cane Use. In each section, terminology used by O&M specialists is explained, including "senses," "environment," "travel," and "space," and related to the child's developmental stage. The section on reaching notes the importance of stimulating the baby's interest in the toys and people in his or her environment. The section on crawling emphasizes the baby's use of all senses as he or she travels through the house exploring new environments and stresses the importance of encouraging the baby to do some things independently. The section on walking describes the developmental stages of the baby pulling himself up on furniture and cruising along walls and comments on the importance of arranging home furnishings for child safety. The section on cane use discusses pre-cane mobility devices such as push-toys and procedures for learning to use a white cane. Numerous black and white photographs illustrate the text. (JDD)

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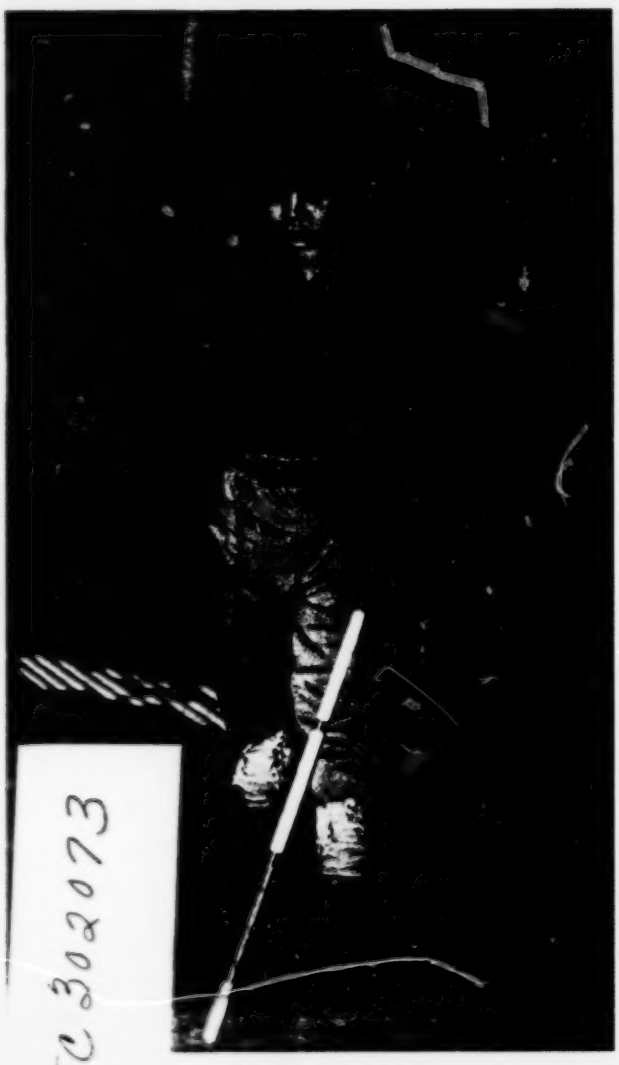

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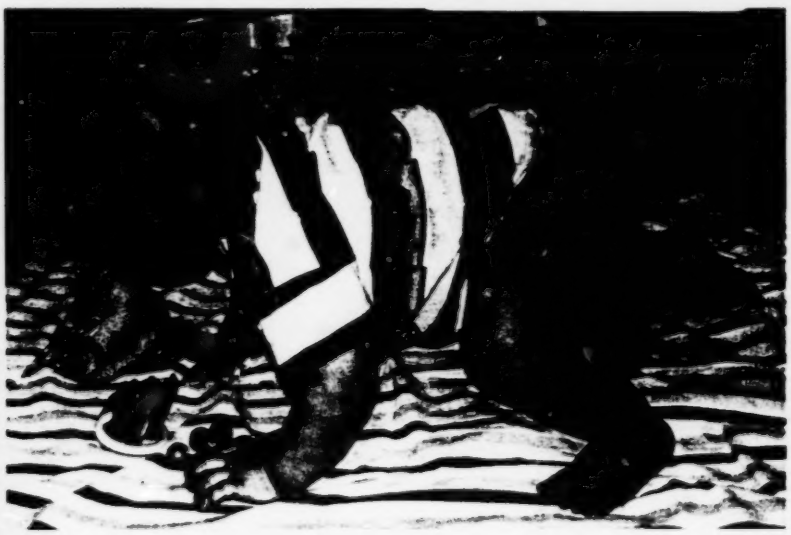

Reaching Crawling Walking... Let's Get Moving

Orientation and Mobility for Preschool Children

Susan S. Simmons, Ph.D.

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Dear Parents,

The purpose of this booklet is to help you, as parents of young children who are visually impaired or blind, understand what Orientation and Mobility is and how you can influence the independence of your child. We believe that every child's independence, self confidence, and self-image affects how they learn. We believe that O&M means independence, and independence means freedom!

Please do not be concerned about whether your child achieves each milestone (skill) at the same time as sighted children. All children progress at their own rate. Some children who are visually impaired progress at the same rate as many sighted children, while others do not. Your child will set his or her own pace. Follow his lead, go day by day, and enjoy your child's development. The quality of each skill is just as important as the number of skills your child develops.

As we wrote this booklet we wanted you to be able to see your own child on these pages. For this reason we have done two things. We have alternated *he* and *she* by section so that both boys and girls are recognized. We have also made a conscious effort to say "child who is visually impaired" placing the value on the child and not on the disability. These are two small considerations with major significance as to how we use language to demonstrate our philosophies.

Our best wishes that you and your child will enjoy the richness of independence!

Susan

Susan S. Simmons, Ph.D.

Sharon

Sharon O'Mara Maida, M.Ed.

Index

Reaching 3
The New Arrival 4
Reach Out and Touch 4
My Favorite Things 6
Things To Remember 7
Crawling 8
Rocking and Rolling 9
Creeping and Crawling...I'm Really Moving Now 10
Movin'...Movin'...Movin' 11
Stepping Up 12
Things To Remember 12
Walking 13
Finding My Way 14
Creating Trails...Trailing! 15
Surprises...How To Enjoy Them Without Bumps 17
Things To Remember 18
Cane Use 19
Using Pre-Cane Mobility Devices 20
Learning to Use a White Cane 21
Things To Remember 24

Introduction

Let's begin at the beginning...Straight talk

Just as you learned some technical terms when your child's eye doctor explained your child's visual impairment, we'd like to introduce a few new terms to you.

Over the next few years, as your child grows and develops, many people will help you encourage your child to learn about and explore the wonderful world around her. You may already be acquainted with a teacher of the visually impaired, someone who will play an important role in your child's education. Another professional you will form a partnership with is an Orientation and Mobility Specialist, usually referred to as an O&M specialist or Mobility Specialist.

Orientation refers to knowing where you are by using clues from your environment. Mobility means moving safely from place to place in a graceful and efficient manner. An Orientation and Mobility Specialist teaches people who are blind or visually impaired the specific skills they need to determine where they are and how to independently, safely, and efficiently go where they want.

How Can an O&M Specialist Help?

For preschool children, Orientation and Mobility means helping a child to become independent through movement, exploration, the use of her senses, and gaining practical information about her world.

O&M services may be offered in any type of program. In early childhood programs, advice from an O&M specialist may be offered to teachers as well as parents. Often, O&M Specialists are also trained as teachers of the visually impaired. By the time your child is walking independently you should request an O&M evaluation.

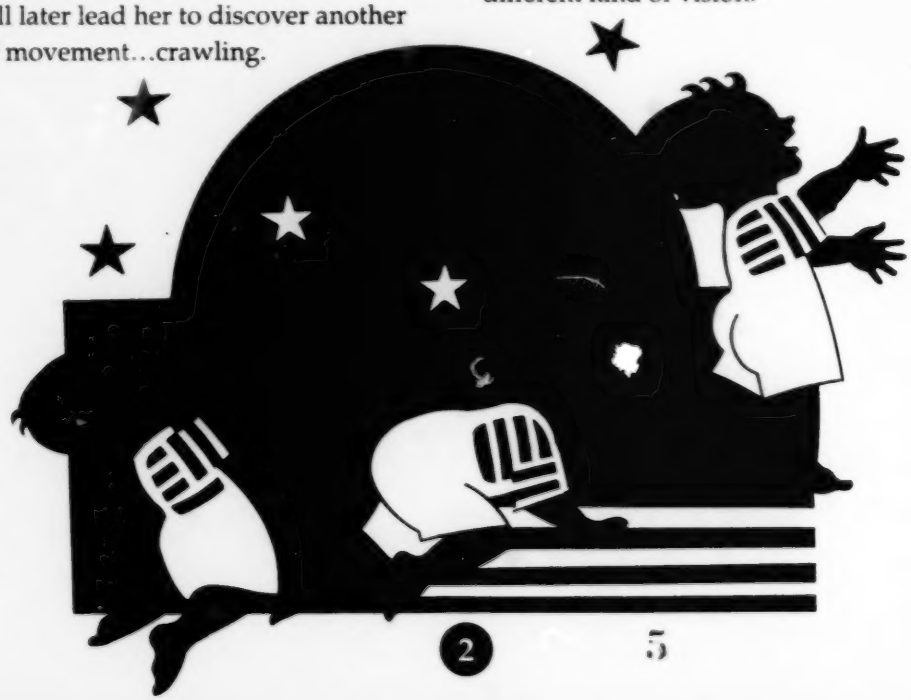
This booklet is divided into four sections—reaching, crawling, walking and cane use. The skills in each section build on one another.

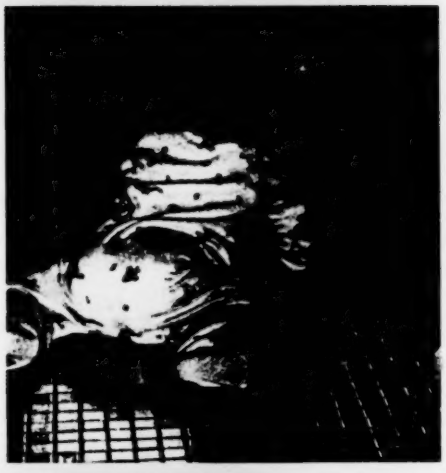
As your child masters reaching out into her world for toys and people she enjoys, she will discover that she is the master of her body and begin to roll. Rolling will offer her a whole new sense of freedom! It will help her understand more about how she can gain some control over her environment. For example, she can now roll to get the toy she wants. This new sense of control will later lead her to discover another method of movement...crawling.

Crawling brings new freedom to your little one. She'll get up on all fours and rock her body back and forth, learning to balance. She will discover she can move freely through the house, climbing under, and around chairs, sofas, and other furniture. Once she explores what is on the floor, she will begin to pull herself up on anything that can support her. When she discovers what exists above the floor, her world will really expand.

As she begins to walk, her body will again provide her with new information. As she walks on the floor, she can identify different textures, and her hands will come in contact with many different objects. She will practice her balance and uncover new worlds.

These early years are a perfect time for her to experiment with the sounds, smells, tastes and textures that will become her eyes in a world without full vision. Reaching, crawling and walking are the building blocks to independence. Her ability to use the information she gains from these activities and from her senses will give her an entirely different kind of vision.





Reaching

Senses, environment, travel and space are terms commonly used by O&M specialists when talking about how to make the world meaningful. We will add to your knowledge of each of these words at the beginning of the first three sections. Whiie we will discuss each term separately, these terms are often used in combination with each other.

Senses: Most people think of senses as the general experience of tasting, touching, smelling, and hearing, used in conjunction with vision. The infant who is visually impaired receives his most important sensory information from you. *Your smell* as you come close to him, *your voice* as you speak and sing to him, *your touch* when you hold him against your body, bathe him, change his diaper, or gently massage him with lotion.

Environment: Most people think of environment as the air and water which we are all trying to keep clean. For your baby, an environment is any place he may get to know as part of his world. One of the first environments your child will come in contact with is the inside of his crib. Later he will learn about larger environments such as a living room, kitchen, backyard, or neighborhood. Each of these places has special features. Just as the crib has railings and a soft mattress, a kitchen has low cupboard doors, metal appliances, and a linoleum or tile floor that can feel cold. A living room has carpet and stuffed furniture which your child may lay on.

Travel: Most people think travel requires a car or bus or plane. But for your baby when we (O&Ms) talk about travel we're referring to how your baby moves. We'll go into more detail in later sections as he gets a bit more independent.

Space: Most people think of space as outer space or enough space to fit the watermelon into the refrigerator. For your baby, space refers to the area around him, as you twirl around in space or as he reaches out into space. You'll see how space becomes very important to him as he becomes more independent.

The New Arrival

I feel so safe in your arms, I know there's a big world out there to learn about, but right now your voice, your smell, and your touch are my world. Since you can't hold me all the time, please give me time to lay on my tummy as well as my back when you put me down. If I complain put me on my tummy, on your lap, or over your legs so I know you are close by. Sometimes I just need to know the people I love are very close to me.

Orientation and Mobility is a lifelong process that begins as early as the first few months of a child's life. While your baby is not moving through space by himself yet, he is learning his first orientation skills. He adjusts to your arms when being held and becomes familiar with his immediate surroundings, like his crib. At first he may be interested in a particular part of his crib like a mobile or the bumper pads. Becoming familiar with these surroundings helps him to feel oriented (know where he is) and safe to interact with his environment by grasping and reaching. While some children will actively explore their surroundings, others may need to be motivated by you.

Reach Out and Touch

What a life! I'm starting to get really brave! I love all of my favorite toys around me, like my music box and my squeaky bear. I like to listen to one thing at a time. I really like it when you touch the toy to my hand and squeak it, or squeak it close to me then help me find it. I'm learning to reach out and find my favorite toys.

Toys that make interesting sounds, such as rattles with bells, squeaky toys, or crinkle toys may be used in many different ways to encourage your baby to find interest in the world. Your baby will begin to know the world through these play experiences. A mobile or busy–box that is attached to the crib, within your baby's grasp, will encourage reaching. It will also give your baby a way to know where he is when he is laid in his

crib. A few toys can be attached to the crib or other play area to give your baby the chance to learn the location of the objects. These stationary toys will give your child a chance to discover the noises these toys make, as well as to explore the toy with his hands to learn more about the way they feel.

While encouraging your baby to interact with his environment, you will want to pay special attention to his responses, especially when there's a lot of noise. For example, if the television is on, the phone rings, and other children are playing in the living room, you may see the baby suddenly get cranky. Or he may lay very still. These are common responses you will notice when he is overstimulated. During these times, he feels like too much is going on around him. He is trying to sort out what is happening and make sense of it. Crying or becoming very still are natural responses to too much noise. You can comfort him by holding him close, reassuring him, and perhaps reducing the noise level in the room. But quieting could also mean pleasure or interest. You will need to learn to interpret your baby's cues. You know your baby better than anyone, so you are the best person to decide about the amount of noise and other stimulation your baby can tolerate and enjoy.

As a parent, your face (if your baby has some vision) and voice are the best motivators for encouraging your baby to reach out. You are a source of safety and familiarity for your baby. You will notice that your baby, just as with all babies, will let you know which are his favorite toys. Usually children enjoy toys they can hold. You can experiment with different toys to see which sounds are interesting to your child. He may get very excited and laugh when he hears a particular toy or even get very quiet and then begin to wiggle his whole body. Your child's favorite toys can be used to encourage your baby to reach out into space.

My Favorite Things

You are really helping me to wonder about my world! You squeak my favorite toys from above me, behind me, over to my side…I'm learning to turn my body to reach for them. Sometimes I reach up, down, or behind me for what I want. I love sitting in different places all over the house, like the living room and kitchen. And I like spending playtime in my own bedroom. Each of these rooms is so different! My bedroom is quiet, warm, and cozy. The kitchen has a cool floor and much more open space. And the living room has a soft, carpeted floor with nice soft furniture.

You will quickly notice that where you place your baby's favorite toys will affect how much he plays with them. At first, placing toys in front of your baby helps make them easier to find and play with. Later, moving toys to either side of your baby or behind him will encourage him to move his body to find the toy. The experiences of turning his body to locate a toy or reaching for a particular sound will help him to develop balance. Eventually you will see that he freely moves his body from one side to the other, and he may even begin to roll.

As you see that your baby is becoming comfortable in familiar areas, you can introduce him to some new places. He may tell you he's comfortable by not fussing when you sit him in a room and leave him for a few moments. Or he may roll around everywhere to explore. Outside areas are wonderful sources of new smells, textures, and a larger variety of sounds. There are many smells that are unique to the outdoors, like the smell of the grass after it is cut, the fragrant smell of flowers, or the barbecue when people are cooking outside. Outside areas can also provide unusual textures, such as the feeling of grass under your child's feet, the feeling of sand in the sand box, or the feeling of leaves and shrubbery as your child explores with his fingers. Your child will also be entertained by the many different sounds he hears outside. At certain times he may hear church bells ringing or planes flying overhead. Depending on where you live, he may hear cars, trucks, and busses traveling down the street. If you live in a quiet area, your child may have the opportunity to hear crickets and birds chirping. The outside area has so many wonderful sensory experiences to offer your child.

Things To Remember

1. Attach some toys to the crib.
2. Watch the baby for signs of too much noise. Remember he may get cranky or suddenly quiet. Quieting could also mean pleasure or interest. You will learn to interpret *your baby's* cues.
3. At first, place toys in front of the baby and then in different locations.
4. Change the baby's positions, and include placing him on his tummy.
5. Encourage your baby to reach out. Reaching out for toys or people will allow him to make contact with the environment.

Crawling

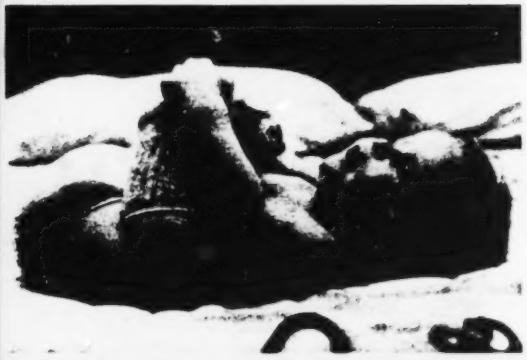
Senses: Now your baby's world has really expanded. Remember when your child was an infant and you were the only person she paid attention to? Now that she is expanding her world, she is using her senses much more. Now, her touch experiences expand from what touches her to *what she touches* with any part of her body. For example, as she crawls on different surfaces (like tile, carpet, or grass) her hands and legs will be getting different sensations. She'll begin to notice the smell of toys, the dog bowl, and the grass. Just as all young children do, she may also taste them. She will be much more sensitive about the tastes of baby foods and how they feel in her mouth. Before, she was just listening to you. Now she will be making her own noises and playing little voice games with you as she begins to recognize other sounds in her world.

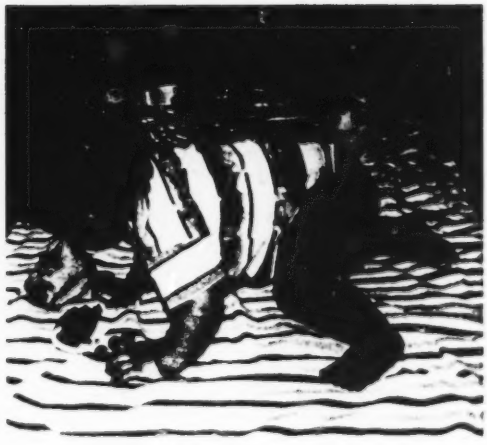
Environment: What a switch! As a little baby, her environment was very limited. Now she is beginning to discover there are different environments, such as the bathroom, living room, and kitchen. Each of these rooms is a different environment with unique characteristics. She will begin crawling from room to room, linking these environments together. Her world begins to expand. Initially her world consisted of your arms and her crib area. Now her world is a combination of all the rooms or areas where she spends time moving and playing.

Travel: Previously, you were doing the traveling or moving around with your baby. Now, she is doing her own traveling as she crawls from room to room.

Space: Your baby's space is also expanding. Now she is crawling through space. The space under the coffee table feels very different than the living room's open space.

Putting it all together: Your baby is using all of her senses as she travels (crawls) through the house, exploring new environments (rooms), and experiencing different kinds of space (under furniture, around the TV, and across the living room).





Rocking and Rolling

I'm really moving now. I roll all over the house. I love the way it feels to roll over to the sofa and pull the blanket down on myself! I can find my toys when they are close by and there is always something new to explore.

Before actually crawling, children experiment with moving their bodies by rolling. This is an exciting time for your child because she is now beginning to gain control over getting what she wants. For example, she may hear the metal handle clanging on the dresser drawer as it is closed. She can now roll toward the sound if she wants to find that noise.

Your baby is becoming quite strong as she moves her body back and forth. At this stage, you may also find that she is quite flexible. You may even find her pulling her legs up against her chest and nibbling on her toes! Later she may spend more time on her tummy. When she is strong enough she will get up on all fours and rock her body back and forth in one place. All babies do this. It gives them a chance to experience a rhythmic movement, and the motion is really fun. Some babies who are visually impaired may rock in this position for a few weeks. Other children may continue to enjoy rocking for a period of months. Your child is learning about her body and her balance while rocking in the crawling position. Once she has had a chance to experiment with rocking, it is time to present her with toys to encourage her to move either forward or backward from the rocking position.

We like to encourage babies to move. With their favorite voices and toys to interest them, most children really enjoy moving. Crawling will give your baby a chance to get a lot of information about the environment while using her hands and feet to explore. Initially your child will explore the floor areas. Then she may become more curious and start to explore objects that are in the room, such as the sofa. Later you may encourage your child to move under a table or even over some pillows. Your baby may enjoy moving by rolling, scooting, crawling or even inventing some other form of movement. Regardless of the method your child chooses to move, praise her as she discovers that she can move!

Creeping and Crawling... I'm Really Moving Now!

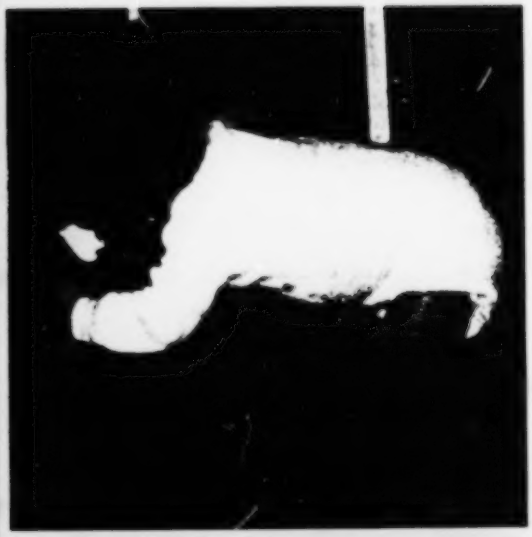
I love rocking on my hands and knees. Sometimes I rock, then crawl to a toy I want. I can go all over the house! I know where I am by the texture of the floor (carpet, tile), and I listen to everything for hints. I love my house! My world is getting bigger and bigger.

At first, music or clapping rhythm may encourage your baby to rock in the crawling position. Many babies enjoy this rocking sensation as it develops balance and strength. Talking to your baby during these activities can motivate her to keep her head up rather than facing down toward the ground. Often babies with little or no usable vision will face downward. It is important to encourage them to look forward, keeping their head up. This will also help to strengthen neck and shoulder muscles.

Once your baby begins to enjoy this crawling position, you will want to encourage her to reach for her favorite toys. Place some of her toys slightly out of reach. This will help her reach just a little further. This little reaching game will help her get experience with her balance in a new position.

When your baby is comfortable reaching for toys while in the crawling position, it is time to encourage her to begin moving forward, crawling. Some babies crawl backwards first. That's just fine since moving through space is what we are after. Some babies need very little encouragement. Others seem less adventurous and need to be approached more slowly. Together you and your baby will figure out what is the most fun.

Some babies will begin to pull themselves up on furniture, cruising around almost anything without first crawling. This is fine. If your baby chooses to do this, you will want to continue to encourage floor activities, as well as cruising.



Movin'...Movin'...Movin'

I used to think the world was in your arms or in my crib. Now I am really moving around! It is such fun to explore the furniture, tear up the magazines, and open the kitchen cupboards. I'm so glad you moved the poisons and detergents up high out of my reach and stuck those little things in the wall plugs. Now I can explore anywhere I want to go, and you don't seem to mind. My world just keeps getting bigger and bigger!

Now that your baby has begun to move around, her world is at her fingertips. As an infant she spent time in your arms. Now she is free to investigate the many areas in her home. As she crawls she will be learning where certain pieces of furniture are and where the floor covering changes (like living room carpet to cold kitchen tile). You have provided the opportunity for your baby to move out and explore.

Just as you attached some stationary toys to the crib, there should be some familiar objects in the home that stay in the same place to help orient your child. An early childhood O&M specialist or early childhood Teacher of the Visually Impaired can be very helpful at this time to give you some ideas about how to arrange your home so your child can move about freely. Sometimes furniture may need to be rearranged to allow your child to cruise around the room.

By creating ways to move from place to place using furniture and sounds that are familiar, your baby can begin to develop some simple routes. She will learn the most by doing many things herself. It will be great fun for you to watch her in action. Even if you know what she wants, encourage her to go get it herself. You will find her particularly motivated when she wants a certain person to hold her or when she wants a favorite toy. After a few times she will really be proud of herself. Doing things herself will build her confidence and independence.

Stepping Up

I'm really getting independent now! I loved to crawl up and down the stairs, and now I can crawl up one step at a time, sometimes gripping the railing.

Stairs are often a concern for parents. Babies enjoy crawling up and down the stairs. To encourage your baby to do this, start by sitting her on the bottom step, then allow her to crawl up just a few steps at a time. When she is ready she will do more. If you do not have stairs at home you can have her crawl over large objects such as a sofa cushion placed on the floor, or large pillows which give her body a similar crawling experience. You may also take her to a park where she can crawl up the steps to a slide, or to a friend's home where she can experiment crawling on the stairs. It's a good idea to use a baby gate or other method for blocking the stairs when you aren't able to give your baby full attention.

Things To Remember

1. Baby-proof the house.
2. Let your baby enjoy the experience of doing things for herself.
3. Praise and encourage your baby as she begins to roll, scoot, or crawl.
4. Select some objects such as your baby's high chair, a baby gym, play pen, or any large pieces of furniture that can be kept in the same place in your home. Your child can use these objects as orientation devices.

Walking

Senses: Walking adds sensory information (what his senses tell him). Now the texture of the carpet and the feel of the kitchen floor are especially noticeable to the bottom of his feet with and without shoes! He is touching many different surfaces (walls, furniture, floors, doors, windows). He now recognizes the opening music for his favorite TV show, and likes to stomp when he is on a stairway so he can listen to the sounds as they echo off the walls. He uses his vision and his hands as he gently explores a door to find the knob. He can go many places independently and he is very confident at home and in other familiar environments. He holds short, simple conversations, stating his needs (a word or two) and responding when you ask him to do something. He is using his senses to receive detailed information about the world.

Environment: Just as crawling expanded his environments, walking will too. He'll begin to know where he is because he recognizes the carpet under his feet or a piece of stationary furniture such as the kitchen table. He is now connecting one environment to another as he continues to develop routes from one place to the next.

Travel: His previous form of travel was crawling. Now he has graduated to the big time. He is walking!

Space: As he explores space, he uses the information he remembers about his surroundings (the space) to help him know where he is. This is orientation. He can check to see if he is correct by using familiar sounds or furniture.

Putting it all together: Now he is using his senses as he travels (walks) through space (from room to room) confidently connecting his environments (kitchen to living room).

Finding My Way

Now I'm impressing everyone! I can find my way around the living room while I stand, holding onto furniture for support. I can go get some of the toys I want or maybe just find your coffee cup on the living room table! ALL kids bump into things and fall down once in a while, and I will too. Encourage me to keep going. When I fall, just say, "Uh oh" or "Boom," and encourage me to get back up. I'm making a lot of noises now, and I love to play silly voice games with you. Keep cheering me on. I love it!

If you haven't already had an early childhood O&M specialist involved in your child's program, this would be a particularly good time to arrange an evaluation. The O&M specialist will evaluate how your toddler is using his senses and moving through space. She may be able to suggest some ways to organize your home that will encourage your child to move more. This guidance will be particularly helpful as your baby becomes mobile.

It will not be long before your baby will begin to explore areas above the floor. As he begins to pull to his feet, you'll find it quite natural to encourage him. He will really be tickled to hear you praise him. You may want to check the furniture to be sure it is stable and does not tip easily. This is important because your child will begin grasping onto furniture to pull himself up, and you may not be able to watch him every moment. If there is a piece of furniture that does not seem stable, you may want to put it in a room the baby doesn't go into. You will want to cover sharp corners on coffee tables and other furniture so you won't be worried about him falling. It is fun to put toys on the sofa, as it often gives him a reason to stand up and get them.

As your baby begins to reach for toys that are placed on a chair, sofa, or table, he will discover he has to move his body a little bit to the right or left. Once he discovers this, he will soon discover cruising. Cruising is when toddlers begin to walk around holding onto furniture, the couch, the coffee table, and along the wall. All toddlers need lots of practice cruising. However, toddlers who are visually impaired are gaining lots of sensory information (using their senses). They will feel confident when holding onto, or walking next to, furniture or walls for support. Don't worry if he seems to do this for a long time. This is great independence for him. Children at this stage are just learning how to effectively use their balance, and it takes *a lot* of practice. Once your child is comfortable and able to balance, he may even begin to stand alone for a second or two.

Creating Trails...Trailing!

Now I've got it! If I just walk with one hand on the wall, well, maybe two hands on the wall, I feel really safe. When I follow walls, I know where I am. In my own house I don't always need that help, but if I'm in a new place walls are my best friends.

After your toddler has been cruising around the coffee table for a while, you may see him progress to cruising along a blank wall. When your child cruises along a wall he is beginning to trail. He may face the wall and shift all of his weight toward the

wall and side step. This is an early form of trailing. Trailing is a skill used by people who are visually impaired to help them identify characteristics in their environment such as the texture of the wall or location of a doorway. At first, trailing along a wall is done by side stepping while two hands touch the wall. A young child will often automatically use this two–hand approach. Later one hand lightly touching the wall will be enough.

It is a wonderful time of discovery as your child learns he can explore areas by himself while he is standing. If you have an older child, he may have the desire to pick up your toddler and carry him wherever he may wish to go. Help your older child to encourage the toddler to do things himself. Suggest they watch him and encourage him with their voice. Soon enough, they too will be excited to see him do so much on his own.

As your toddler begins to feel more independent, he will rely less on furniture for support. Moving out into open space in the center of a room may create some uncertainty. Begin by having your child take a few steps to Mommy or Daddy. Your hugs and encouragement are always the best reward! Resist the temptation to walk backwards as you coax him to come to you. Stay where you are. He needs to trust his sense of orientation by listening to your voice.

Surprises...How To Enjoy Them Without Bumps

Uh oh! I seem to be bumping into a lot of things, Mom calls them "surprises" and we laugh together. I need to find a way to let something else bump for me first. Surprises are more fun that way. My hands work very well as bump protectors for me.

Soon your child will be walking everywhere on his own. There are times, especially in unfamiliar places, that he will be bumping into things. There are a variety of techniques that we teach so that children can use their hands as bumpers. These are called protective techniques. Upper Protective Technique is a complicated way of saying, "Use one hand as a bumper to protect the body above the waist." The Lower Protective Technique is using one hand as a bumper to protect the body below the waist. These techniques are adapted for young children, so that it is easier for them to do. They are laying the foundation for more formal techniques as your child gets older. Your O&M specialist will be able to give you some ideas about the best way for your child to learn protective techniques.

Sighted guide techniques for young children are also important. Adults who are visually impaired commonly take a guide's arm, just above the elbow, in order to better judge where the person's body is moving. For small children, either holding an adult's two fingers or wrist offers similar information. Adults tend to take a small child's hand to guide them. To children who are visually impaired this practice can feel like they are being pulled around. It is important for the child to choose to hold onto the adult. Wearing a ring on your finger or bracelet on your wrist can help the child remember where to hold onto you. Reminders like, "Hold my wrist, just like a bracelet" can be helpful in the beginning.

If you are wearing a jacket with cuffs, ask your child to reach up under the cuff and hold your wrist, as it is difficult to get a good grip over clothing. When your child is walking with another child, he may be able to grip above the bend in the elbow. If your child is in preschool or kindergarten, where children form lines and walk to certain places, your O&M specialist will suggest some adapted techniques so that your child can be one of the group.

The more often your child uses a sighted guide at home, the more comfortable he will be using this skill in a variety of settings. What a wonderful step toward feeling in control of his world!

Things To Remember

1. Cover sharp corners on furniture, and make sure furniture is stable.
2. Give your child the opportunity to explore and do things himself.
3. Consult an early childhood O&M specialist, and schedule an evaluation.
4. Have your child use sighted guide, holding your wrist or two fingers.
5. Use push–toys or other pre–cane mobility devices to help teach your child that something he pushes in front of him can bump first.
6. Encourage your child to use his hand to protect himself (protective techniques).

Cane Use

Your child is walking all around the house and perhaps the yard. How will she be able to go places without someone holding her hand all the time? How can she keep from falling when there is a step or curb? How could she go to the neighbors house without you? She can be introduced to a white cane.

The white cane will be the beginning of a new phase of freedom for your child. This simple tool has been the best friend to many people who are blind. There are special cane techniques that your child will learn as she grows and develops and as she begins to travel to a larger variety of places independently. Her cane will offer advanced warning when there is a change, such as a curb or step or something in her way.

What if your child has some functional vision? Many cane users have a lot of usable vision. They can identify familiar people and walk around obstacles without bumping into them. Using a cane makes it possible to walk quickly through unfamiliar or changing areas. If your child has enough functional vision to get around unfamiliar areas without bumping or falling, she may not need to learn to use a cane until she begins school, or sometimes even later. Children with very limited vision can get a great head start learning basic skills when they are younger. Many parents report that their child has experienced increased confidence when the child learns to use a cane. Children often stand up straight and walk much faster knowing the cane will tell them when there is a step down or up, or something in their path.

Beginning to use a cane is a big step for both you and your child! Many of you may have never met a person who is blind. You may be worried that a cane will cause people to look at your child. These are natural responses to something unfamiliar. Give yourself time to adjust. It can be helpful to meet a blind adult. If you do, ask her questions too! Ask her about how she lives independently, what kind of job she has, how she travels from place to place, as well as about her childhood.

Using Pre-Cane Mobility Devices

I'm walking everywhere now. I love to push my grocery cart and popcorn popper. I push my toys into anything in my way, and if I bump, I just go around. I'm really a speeaster now! Watch out. Here I come!

Now that your child is walking (or almost walking) independently, it may be a good time to let her play with push-toys. Push–toys are one type of pre–cane mobility device. A children's play grocery cart, a popcorn popper, or a wooden push cart are just a few of the push-toys that you may find in toy stores. Make sure the push–toy is stable and will not tip easily. You may want to weight the play grocery cart with telephone books or plastic soda bottles filled with sand to make the cart more sturdy. A push–toy is used so that your child will have something to push in front of her to take the bumps first. The push–toy will also help her to keep her balance.

Your Orientation and Mobility specialist may introduce you to some other pre–cane mobility devices that are designed to be pushed by your child. These devices glide very easily on the floor. They will also allow your child to change direction easily. Your child may prefer a particular device—that's great! She's already making decisions for herself!

When your O&M specialist feels your child has had enough practice with push-toys and possibly other pre-cane mobility devices, she will introduce your child to the white cane. At this time, your child will be independently walking with confidence.

By the time any actual O&M instruction with the cane begins, your child has already developed skills which will help her in the successful use of a cane. Your child has learned about her own body and how to identify her body parts. She has learned different ways to locate and hold objects. As your child begins to explore areas beyond her own body, and as she begins to move with greater confidence through unfamiliar areas, she will learn new things about her environment. She will use the information she learned when she was younger, like how to use stationary objects as clues to help her know where she is.

Learning to Use a White Cane

My cane is my new friend. It's just my size. It goes in front of me, and the tip always stays on the ground. If there is a bump, my cane finds it first. If the ground goes down, my cane finds that too. I'm on my way now.

When the cane is introduced to your child, she may like it right away, or it may take some time for her to adjust to it. Just as children have different reactions to the cane, so do parents. Some parents are very excited that there is a tool for their child to use to walk around by herself. Other parents feel awkward about their child using a cane. While the cane is not like a toy that other sighted children have, it will *allow* your child to move around *with* sighted children. If you are still feeling uneasy about the cane, that's quite natural. You have taken a big step toward independence—for you and your child!

The cane your child will use is white, with a red portion at the bottom and a nylon replaceable tip. Most of the canes have a rubberized handle with an elastic loop on the top. The elastic loop should be worn on your child's wrist (like a bracelet) so that she does not drop the cane. Canes are measured for each person's height. As your child grows, she will need a longer cane to match her height. Some canes are collapsible (they fold up), which makes them convenient to put in a purse or school bag. Others are straight and do not fold. Your O&M specialist may have a preference for one or the other.

There are many special skills that your child will learn when using a cane over the next few years. Most importantly, your child will be able to go places by herself and be protected from bumping into objects. Later, your child will be able to use the cane to find steps and curbs. The cane will make your child's life easier.

It is quite likely that people will notice your child and be amazed at her ability. This is often difficult for parents who do not want their child to be singled out. You may find that people will even ask you and your child questions. Most people mean no harm, but are simply curious. You may want to take the opportunity to help people realize how independent your child really is and how proud of her you are.

For a very young child, learning to use a cane is no different than learning any other new skill. We begin by teaching very simple steps. When your child used a push–toy or other special device, it taught her that whatever she pushed in front of her bumped first. The cane is a more advanced tool to give your child information about objects in her path of travel.

There is no magical age when a cane should be introduced. Some instructors will make their decision based on the child's need for a cane. If they prefer to teach these skills with toys or special pre–cane devices, that's fine. If they recommend using a cane first, that's fine too. Sometimes when the cane is introduced early, the O&M specialist will attach jingle bells or some other noise maker to the bottom to make noise and to give the cane weight. This helps the child remember to keep the tip on the floor. Once your child gets the hang of it, the bells will come off and the cane will be her best buddy.

Whether she begins with a pre–cane device (push–toy) or directly with a cane, the first concepts your child will master are related to the understanding that she can push something in front of her that will take bumps and protect her. She will also learn how to hold or grip the toy or cane, and how to control it. For example, she will experiment with how fast she can walk while pushing it. She will also realize that whatever she is using will make a different sound when the floor or outdoor surface changes, giving her a clue about what comes next.

Once introduced to the cane, your child may begin by learning to push the cane in front of her using two hands, then later using only one hand. As she begins to feel comfortable pushing the cane, she may then advance to following a wall with the cane. Usually this skill is taught by having the child walk along a wall holding the cane with the hand opposite the wall so the cane crosses her body (see picture) protecting her from anything in front of her. It is important to remember that the purpose of the cane is to *inform* your child when objects are in her path of travel so that she can either avoid them or identify them.

The sequence of O&M instruction will be altered for each child to accommodate her individual and changing needs. For example, if your child begins going to an infant play group or to an Early Intervention program, several lessons may be spent helping your child become familiar and comfortable with the room where she will be attending classes. An O&M specialist can also be very helpful to her new teachers, showing them routes for her to follow as she moves around her new room or walks to the bathroom. This is important so that after a few times, she can travel around the classroom independently. Because an O&M specialist will spend only a short period of time with you and your child, it is very important for you to help your child practice the new skills. It is helpful to tell your O&M specialist about the places you observe your child having difficulty. Everyone's goal should be for your little speedster to go as many places on her own as she can.

As your child continues to grow and mature, she will continue to be presented with additional methods to remain oriented. And she will become more skillful in moving through space.

Things To Remember

1. Push–toys are fun for your child, and they act as a bumper when she begins moving around.
2. The cane will help your child to be independent.
3. The cane will tell your child when objects are in her path of travel so she can either avoid them or identify them.

You've come a long way, baby!

Your knowledge of O&M has greatly expanded over the pages of this booklet. Your little one has gone from your arms to walking on her own. She has become skilled at using stationary objects to help her remain oriented. She moves through space with confidence, telling her cane where she wants to go and knowing she's never alone. Throughout the many stages in your child's life to this point, you have allowed her to be your guide. As she continues to grow and mature, she will continue to let you know when *she* is ready for the challenges you present to her.

Enjoy your journey together.

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